The Framing of Collegiate Sports Success: A Qualitative Thematic Analysis of *Sportscenter*'s Coverage of 3 Case Studies

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Abstract

This study takes a closer look into collegiate sports success and the ways in which it is covered in the sports media. Collegiate sports success is celebrated by the media with an increase in coverage which includes an influx of differing themed narratives. This study seeks to identify and understand the themes that are used to frame three unique collegiate success case studies. The study uses framing theory and previous research to attempt to identify and understand the themes present in ESPN’s Sportscenter coverage of collegiate sports success. The 2016-17 Clemson Tigers BCS championship game victory, the 2018 Loyola-Chicago Ramblers Final Four appearance, and the 2007 Heisman Trophy winner, Tim Tebow, serve as unique case studies of collegiate sports success and are examined in order to pinpoint the themes used by the media in the creation of narratives involving collegiate sport success. The units of analysis for this study consists of 20 clips for each case study that are taken from YouTube, containing Sportscenter’s coverage surrounding the seven days before and the seven days after each event. The three case studies where chosen due to their own unique characteristics which will aid in the identification of differing themes that run through Sportscenter’s coverage of collegiate sports success.

Keywords: thematic analysis, case study, framing theory
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Introduction

The sports media has been shown to create narratives that will interest the sports viewers (Lewis and Weaver, 2013). Many of the themes are ‘classic’ media, or journalistic themes or myths Lule (2001), while others are unique to sports (Messner, Dunbar, & Hunt, 2000). It is important to understand the complex use of these themes in creating sports related narratives. By the choosing of these three unique case studies the results of this research can be extrapolated to include similar cases and therefore, adding to the existing research. This thematic analysis can lead to a better understanding of how frames are used in the media to maintain and even grow viewership. This study will examine the themes that are present in ESPN’s Sportscenter’s coverage of three separate case studies, the collegiate football BCS championship season of the 2016-17 Clemson Tigers, the NCAA Final Four run of the 2018 Loyola-Chicago Ramblers, and the 2007 Heisman Trophy win of the Florida Gators’ quarterback, Tim Tebow.

The purpose of this study is to identify the themes used by Sportscenter in the coverage of the sports success of a collegiate team and/or individual. Guided by framing theory and previous research this study will analyze media clips of Sportscenter’s broadcasts to determine which themes are used in the framing of these individual narratives. This research examines how Sportscenter’s coverage of these three unique cases influenced the public perception of the individual teams and players covered. Framing theory will provide a guide to the inductive thematic analysis conducted in an effort to uncover the themes throughout each of the three narratives. Previous research will aid in the creation of prominent themes that run throughout the
narratives. Themes identified by Messner, et al. (2001), Lule (2001), and Lewis and Weaver (2013) will serve as guidelines for the thematic analysis of the narratives produced by ESPN’s *Sportscenter* for the three case studies. The study will also utilize the four phases of theme development set forth by (Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, & Bondas, 2015). The coupling of these two principles combined with the uniqueness of the individual case studies and the addition of the utilization of *Sportscenter* as the medium aids in furthering the thematic research of the sports media.

**Frames and Frameworks**

In communication, framing refers to the collection of experiences, ideologies, and stereotypes individuals use to interpret the world around them. Frames help to shape an individual’s views and behaviors during social interactions. The term ‘frame,’ originally proposed in the field of ecology, refers to a conceptualization of understanding that allows for animals to make sense of their interactions with others (Bateson, 1955). For example, frames allow a dog to distinguish whether it should fight or play with another dog. Goffman (1974) later expanded on this idea by setting the theoretical framework into the field of social sciences. The term ‘primary framework’ is used to describe the interpretations humans make about the surrounding characteristics of an interaction (Goffman, 1974). According to Goffman (1974), frames are a collection of perspectives and concepts that are created in order to arrange experiences and shape an individual’s actions. “… a primary framework is one that is seen as rendering what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful” (Goffman, 1974, p. 21).
A frame or framework describes an individual’s understanding of what occurs within and around a social interaction. A frame is a “central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning,” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, p. 143). Framing is a process that allows for individuals to develop an understanding of an interaction or to change their conceptualization of a situation. The evolution of frameworks into the social sciences has allowed for the introduction of multiple theories describing frames and human interaction, one of which is framing theory.

**Framing theory**

The overarching theme of framing theory is that an issue can be seen through multiple perspectives and can be understood in a variety of different ways. The frame, or ‘lens’ that individuals use to view each issue can be molded and adapted to produce a desired outcome of behavior. Framing theory is particularly present within the media. The media focuses on certain events and omits others in order to form a desired meaning. The simple omission of events and perspectives disqualifies the viewing public from making a fully informed decision and in turn, guiding their actions. Framing effect, a phenomenon described as changes made to a narrative or presentation of an idea, issue, or event produce a change in opinion or attitude toward the certain idea, issue, or event. These changes are often small and can create an often large change in opinion (Chong, Druckman, 2007). A person’s frame in their own thoughts has a substantial impact on their overall opinion. Political candidates utilize this knowledge to impassion voters and change attitudes to be in line with that of the politician. Highlighting certain parts of a candidate’s platform and minimizing others aids in setting frames that will be in line with a voter’s already existing values (Jacoby, 2000). A more modern definition of framing, “to frame a communicating text or message is to promote certain facets of a ‘perceived reality’ and make them more salient in such a way that endorses a
specific problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or a
treatment recommendation,” (Entman, 1993, p. 51),
extends framing to the media.

Framing theory, in the field of television sports broadcasting, couples narratives with visual
images to produce effects that intend to frame the broadcasts to align with certain themes that are
prevalent in the sports world. “Sports journalists can and do employ various frames that
emphasize specific content in their stories,” (Lewis & Weaver, 2013, p. 219). The mix of
narratives and visuals can be a powerful combination when it comes to framing certain issues.
The potential of visuals, in framing theory, was recognized by Goffman (1979) when discussing
advertising and gender framing. The use of framing, by journalists and broadcaster allow
audiences to process great deals of information quickly by ‘pre-sorting’ that information into
frames that are easy recognizable by the audience (Gitlin, 1980). This allows audiences to create
views about and understand information that, without, the use of frames could be overwhelming.
Framing theory suggests how individuals should interpret those views. Framing theory has never
been more utilized then in today’s media outlets. The use of framing theory covers issues
involving politics, public relations, school shootings, education, advertising, and sports. Framing
allows for the media to extend their biased points of view onto readers, watchers, listeners and
consumers. The use of framing has become increasingly more noticeable, especially in the fields
of public relations and politics.

**Strategic Framing**

Hallahan (1999) describes strategic framing in public relations as crucial in the definition of
social issues. “Social problems and disputes can be explained in alternative terms by different
parties who vie for the preferred definition of a problem or situation to prevail” (Hallahan, 1999,
The organization of ideas and actions by the public is influenced by the frames put forth by the media or organization. Ihlen & Nitz (2008) propose that framing influences an individual’s judgements and actions. Strategic framing in the media is used for many of the same reasons. Media framing allows for the media to influence the attitudes and behaviors of their publics by allowing them access to only particular, strategically planned aspects of a certain idea or issue.

Strategic framing allows for information to be more streamlined, it becomes more impactful or memorable (Entman, 1993). The media use strategic framing to create lasting impressions on publics when it comes to defining issues and changing certain behaviors involved with these issues. “The entire study of mass communication is based on the premise that the media have significant effects,” (McQuail, 1994, p. 327). These effects as described by McQuail (1994) are the evolution of framing theory making its way into the media and mass communication as a whole. According to McQuail (1994), these media effects have both a strong and limited effect on the public. The desired effect of framing theory in the media is to influence the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of the public. This effect would be considered a strong media effect and media would have succeeded in strategically framing images of reality in a powerful and patterned way that serve to influence the public.

**Framing in Sports**

In the case of sports, framing theory and strategic framing allows for sports media outlets to formulate stories that will provide the viewing public with a point of view in order to shape their attitudes when it comes to athletes, teams, and organizations. Through framing theory, media outlets can help to shape attitudes and therefore change behaviors. Sports media outlets produce stories that involve sports teams and athletes and have to identify the information that is reported.
The way in which athletes are portrayed in the media stems from the actions and decisions producers, sportswriters, and editors of the specific sports programs make. These decisions include the features, athletic or personal, and the style in which that narrative will be delivered to the audiences (Lewis & Weaver, 2013, p. 221). According to Price, Tewksbury, & Powers (1997) these frames can influence the way that athletes and teams are understood and evaluated in the public.

One example of how framing in the sports media can uplift a player or team into the public eye by the prevalence and framing of a story is the rise of Doug Flutie in 1984. Flutie, a Boston College quarterback and Heisman Trophy winner, was thrust into the public view when he and his team defeated, then #1 ranked Miami (Florida) Hurricanes, in a matchup, November 23rd, 1984, via a last second ‘Hail Mary’ pass, dubbed the “Miracle in Miami”. The media portrayed Flutie as an all-American quarterback at an underdog university defeating the ‘bad guys’ of college football. This example extends further back to include the framing of the often-criticized Miami football team for not following the rules and being characterized by the media as ‘bullies’ and ‘thugs.’ According to Lewis & Weaver (2013) when a player gains more and more coverage, through the media, he/she is judged by not only their on the field accomplishments but also by their off field lives, which are reported on by the media.

The media determine what parts of their lives that are to be reported. These narratives are created to improve the appeal of a sports television broadcast to accomplish goals such as enhancing the audience share, profit, or even status of the telecast. Media aim to appeal to a broad number of viewers, not just those viewers that tune in for a specific sport or athlete. There is a need in sports broadcasting to create personas for athletes, to provide a personality, a narrative, to entertain fans. Fans have a desire to embrace athletes and their personalities, which
are often constructed using recognized human qualities and stereotypes (Izod, 1996). To keep and maintain viewership sports media consistently constructs and frames stories about athletes and teams that peak the interests of viewers. These narratives are constructed in a way that may or may not tell the entire story of an individual or team and tend to frame each in a way that keeps audiences interested and engaged. One way of accomplishing this kind of engagement is the creation of narratives where certain themes emerge. These themes are prevalent throughout media, including journalism and sports.

**Themes in Media & Sports**

When discussing framing theory, themes play a prevalent role. There are common themes that run throughout narratives. For example, in journalism, Lule (2001) identifies seven recurring myths, or themes, that have guided narratives throughout human history and claims that these themes are adapted and shifted in order to resonate in current cultures. Lule (2001) identifies ‘The Victim,’ ‘The Scapegoat,’ ‘The Hero,’ ‘The Good Mother,’ ‘The Trickster,’ ‘The Other World,’ and ‘The Flood’ as master myths within journalism and the news (pp. 19-25). These myths are “primordial stories that have guided human storytelling for ages. And they guide the news stories of today,” (Lule, 2001, p. 22). Other common themes that occur in journalism, such as conflict or tragedy can be connected into one of these seven myths. According to Bartholome, Lecheler, & De Vreese (2015) conflict is a major theme that is used in framing. Conflict framing is also some of the most often used in political communication across times and culture (De Vreese, Claes, Jochen, & Semetko, 2001). Framing theory is dependent on narrative themes that can span across cultures, socio and economic groups, racial groups, and age groups in order to disseminate a message that can be deciphered by many in order to change attitudes and behaviors.
The sports media is no different in their attempt to frame both athletes, and teams in certain lights that will both entertain and enthrall audiences. Messner et al. (2000) identified 10 recurrent themes throughout sports broadcasting that they have dubbed the ‘Televised Sports Manhood Formula.’ (p. 380). The Manhood Formula is described as a “master ideological narrative that is well suited to discipline boys’ bodies, minds, and consumption choices in ways that constructs a masculinity that is consistent with the entrenched interests of the sports/media/commercial complex,” (Messner et al., 2000, p. 380). These 10 themes are observed again and again when analyzing the frames that sports media send out to the public, especially when targeting 8-17 year-old boys. The 10 recurrent themes produced by Messner et al. (2001) were ‘white males are the voices of authority,’ ‘sports is a man’s world,’ ‘men are foregrounded in commercials,’ ‘women are sexy props or prizes for men’s successful sport performances or consumption choices,’ ‘whites are foregrounded in commercials,’ ‘aggressive players get the prize,’ ‘nice guys finish last,’ ‘boys will be (violent) boys,’ ‘give up your body for the team,’ ‘sports is war,’ and ‘show some guts.’ These themes are used in the framing of sports television to ensure lasting viewership and to change or reinforce beliefs and attitudes toward products that are endorsed and sold through the use of sports media. Major themes that encompass the Televised Sports Manhood Formula are prevalent in ESPN’s Sportscenter coverage of the major sports, including football, basketball, baseball, and extreme sports and continue to run through the advertisements that accompany these sports (Messner et al., 2001). Sociologists involved in the sports genre tend to agree that the most common involvement that fans have with sports is through watching sports on television (Loy, McPherson, & Kenyon, 1978). This viewing public watch the contests and learn about heroes, favorites, and underdogs. These themes run through the mediated sports cycle and form a basis for a shared sports culture.
In America (Wenner, 1989). Mediated sports mirror some of the same values that are important in American society. Edwards (1973) has pinpointed some of these values, characteristics, that develop in sports as character, competition, mental and physical fitness, discipline, nationalism, and religiosity. These values serve to frame the way sports is portrayed in the media, television especially. The visual medium of television allows for these values to be played out before the eyes of the viewers and provides a more visceral platform for the development of these ‘American’ values.

It is clear that the use of dominant themes plays a crucial role in the framing of sports television. A study conducted by Gantz (1981) examined the ‘gratifications’ received by sports fans through the mediated sports genre. Using a sample of students, Gantz (1981) explored the motives of sports fans in viewing football on television and found the strongest of motivations was the development of the theme, ‘the thrill of victory’ (p. 263). The theme, itself, created a curiosity about who would prevail, and viewers experienced better moods and felt better when their favorite teams and players performed well and won. Gantz (1981) also linked the viewing of sports to affective feelings such as excitement, happiness, anger, and nervousness. Although the study was that of an exploratory nature, viewers reported strong affective feelings throughout the act of watching the games and two-thirds of viewers talked with friends leading up to and following the game. Media also thrives to create themes of human interest in the broadcasting of sport. Two themes that arise in sports broadcasts are those of the ‘underdog’ and ‘favorite.’ Sports media is greatly aware that the competition of sport is a primary reason for fans to tune into games. “One of the fundamental characteristics of sport in western society is that it is a competitive activity… This characteristic creates an uncertainty in game situations regarding the
outcome, and this unpredictability is important in creating the tension and excitement for the participants and spectators” (Frazier & Snyder, 1991, p. 380).

The process of creating the rules that help to maintain an ‘even playing field’ and thus, tension is known as ‘tension-balance’ (Kew, 1990). However, it is impossible to maintain this tension-balance for all sporting games all the time. Some individuals or teams will compete at a competitive disadvantage due to undermanned teams, less skill level, and unequal ability. This provides for a team or individual to be less likely to achieve victory and to be dubbed an underdog (Frazier & Snyder, 1991). This underdog theme runs through sports media and creates a narrative that draws in fans. “As suggested by the original use of the term underdog (comes from a 19th century song titled, “The Under-Dog in the Fight”) spectators and fans, at least in American society, are thought to be predisposed to root for the underdog” (Frazier & Snyder, 1991: 381). The theme of underdog then, sets the stage for the theme of the ‘favorite,’ the more skilled and able team that is predicted to prevail. These two prevalent themes add to the narratives that are created by the sports media. Looking back at journalistic myths, another theme emerges in the media coverage of American sport, that is ‘The Hero,’ as suggested by Lule (2001). The creation of both a sports hero and corresponding villain is a theme that resonates throughout sports. This narrative can be, most famously, seen in the stories of both Muhammad Ali and O.J. Simpson. Ali, a heavyweight boxer throughout the 1960’s and 70’s was dubbed a hero for both his in ring skill and his out of ring charisma. Ali, a converted Muslim, was first criticized for his political views during the Vietnam War. Grano (2009) discussed three major themes that were particular to Ali during this time, racism, The Vietnam War, and his conversion to Islam. Ali would later be raised to a status of idol, hero, due to a combination of his boxing ability and his exceptional use of dialogue throughout his career.
during radio and television interviews. This is no more prominent then a photograph taken by *Esquire* magazine in April of 1968, called ‘The Passion of Muhammad Ali, depicting Ali as a contemporary icon of St. Sebastian, the patron saint of athletes (Howells, 2011).

Simpson, a Heisman Trophy winning running back at the University of Southern California and later a Hall of Famer for the NFL’s Buffalo Bills, was treated as a hero during his career and well after when he transitioned into starring in movies. However, after he was alleged to have murdered his ex-wife, transitioned into a villain in the minds of the public. Moore & Moore (1997) describe this as a ‘demonization’ that transformed a cultural hero to a murdering husband in a “post-modern fall from grace” (p. 305). This transition was aided, by not only the journalistic media but also the sports media, who were also covering the case and trial. Themes of a cycle of violence and control were major themes that journalists and prosecutors pointed to throughout the trial (Cotterill, 2001). The theme of hero and villain is prevalent and necessary in sports broadcasting, it creates a narrative that enthralls viewers and cuts into the rooted human need to see who will prevail in the end. The use of these themes in the framing of sports only adds to the effect that framing theory has on viewing publics.

**Sports Success**

In this study three unique, intercollegiate, sports successes are thematically analyzed. The operational definition of sports success for this study is related to a university’s media coverage. An uptick in coverage, due to the success of the intercollegiate team or an individual player in either Division 1-A football or men’s basketball. Cork (2016) reports that football and men’s basketball are the two highest average revenue producers for universities. “The publicity from big-time sports prowess rests heavily on the depictions in the media, which in turn rely on the narratives of a particular season,” (Smith, 2008, p. 389). This study will examine the narratives
that are produced from these particular sports successes by analyzing three such successes and the corresponding media coverage on ESPN’s *Sportscenter*.

**ESPN *Sportscenter***

ESPN is an acronym for Entertainment and Sports Programming Network. ESPN began as a cable network channel dedicated to sports. ESPN was the first and only 24-hour sports cable channel when it began and has since blossomed into additional cable channels, radio, a magazine and to the internet, where it has its own website which includes stats, journalistic sports stories and podcasts. It is owned jointly by The Walt Disney Company (80%) and Hearst Communications (20%). ESPN started broadcasting September 7th, 1979 in Bristol, CT., which has remained its headquarters. *Sportscenter*, ESPN’s daily and nightly sports recap show and is considered ESPN’s flagship program. It began in 1979, and covers highlights of sporting events, analyses of completed and upcoming games, live reports, interviews, and narrative segments in the form of feature stories of pertinent sporting events. *Sportscenter* was originally broadcast once during a 24-hour span, but is now aired 12 times daily. “*Sportscenter*, a resonant repository of contemporary life values ‘coolness’ above all else.” (Farred, 2000, p. 96). *Sportscenter*, being as cultural relevant as it is, with anchors appearing in popular movies, *The Longest Yard* (2005), *Grown Ups* (2010), and *Blended* (2014), and television series, *Brockmire* (2017), #Millenials (2016), and *The Gentlemen’s League* (2011), serves as an important, relative, and contemporary vehicle for this study’s thematic analysis of the sports successes to be examined.

**Clemson Tigers 2016-17**

Clemson University is a public, land grant research university in Clemson, South Carolina. It was founded in 1889 and has become the second largest student population in South Carolina, with an enrollment of 23,406. The Clemson Tigers, football team was founded in 1896, has over
700 victories, is a member of the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) and have won three Division I National Championships (1981, 2016, 2018). The 2016 Division I championship was its first in 35 years and is examined in this study. Due to the extended time between championship seasons, a look at the 2016 Clemson Tigers is merited to understand the themes and narratives sports television uses to describe and promote the team during the championship season. “While talk about sports teams and players has long made up an important part of American conversation, its decibel level has been raised by the commercially induced influence of television,” (Bogart, 1995, p. 107). The 2016 Clemson Tigers present a unique situation of returning to the sports media spotlight after a prolonged absence. Because college football is a huge economic entity that drives and generates revenue for universities across the country [the University of Texas generated $71 million in profit for the 2010-11 season (Smith, 2011)], an examination into Clemson’s college football program is merited to determine the themes used in describing a championship game that generated immense revenue for the university.

**Loyola-Chicago Final Four 2018**

Loyola University of Chicago is a private, Catholic research university. It was founded in 1870 and is located in Chicago, Illinois. Founded by the Jesuits, it is one of the largest Catholic universities in the United States, with an enrollment of 16,437. Loyola’s men’s college basketball team is a member of the Missouri Valley Conference. As an 11 seed in the NCAA tournament in 2018, Loyola-Chicago advanced to the Final Four and was catapulted into the public spotlight. Loyola-Chicago (The Ramblers) last made the Final Four of the NCAA tournament in 1963. During their Final Four run, in 1963, the Ramblers were portrayed as “the future of basketball: they were one of the first major college teams with four black starters, and they played in a fast, athletic style that presaged the high-flying game we know today,”
An examination of the themes present in the media regarding their Final Four appearance in 2018 will allow for a comparison of the media themes present in 1963. An analyzation of the 2018 Loyola Chicago Ramblers is essential in identifying themes that are present in the media coverage of both teams and those they may differ due to changing times and changing characters from one narrative to the next. The emergence of new themes will shed light on the changing face of both America and the sports media’s view of the American sports fan.

**Tim Tebow Heisman 2007**

Timothy (Tim) Tebow is a minor league baseball player in the New York Mets Organization and a regular contributor to ESPN’s college football coverage. He was a quarterback for the University of Florida, located in Gainesville, Florida, from 2006-10, and the Heisman Trophy winner in 2007. Tebow also won two BCS national championships (2006, 2008) while at Florida. He was drafted in the first round of the NFL draft in 2010 and went on to lead the Denver Broncos to the playoffs. Tebow has since made a move to the minor leagues of Major League Baseball (MLB). Throughout both his college career and his professional football career, Tebow was featured often in the sports media due to his, at the time, unconventional quarterback play and also his religious [Tebow was a Christian missionary] and sexual beliefs. Tebow has been featured through skits on Saturday Night Live (SNL), a weekly parody television show broadcasted on NBC. Tebow became known for his ‘Tebowing,’ which is the stance he is most famous for on the football field. A pose that consists of getting down on one knee and bowing the head to form a ‘prayer pose.’ The ‘Tebowing’ pose was an internet sensation and was a craze, both throughout the sports media and the popular culture of America. Throughout his career, Tebow has fostered many narratives in the sports media, on television
programs, and on the internet. In 2012 an ESPN poll revealed him to be “America’s favorite active pro athlete” (Poll, 2012, p. 1). Tebow has become a public figure that crosses over from the youth of America to the adult sports fan and as far as the everyday ‘soccer moms’ in society. Tebow has been dubbed both a hero and a villain, as an all-American athlete, and as a vehicle for religion in America. An examination into the specific themes presented in the sports media will help to produce a framework of how a religious athlete is received by the viewing public. Tebow’s framing by the sports media is unique and an analyzation of his Heisman Trophy winning season and how these themes emerged is essential in understanding the frames that help catapult a sports star to the forefront of a multi-media platform.

**Methodology**

**Case Studies**

A thematic analysis of three separate case studies was conducted in order to search for themes in ESPN’s *Sportscenter*’s coverage. The first case study explored the coverage of the 2016-17 Clemson Tigers BCS National Championship game against the Alabama Crimson Tide. Clemson defeated Alabama 35-31 on January 9th, 2017. This study was chosen due to research collected about the 2016-17 Clemson Tigers and the opportunity that was present to understand the themes of winning a collegiate football national championship after a 35-year championship drought. The second case study was that of the 2018 Loyola-Chicago Ramblers NCAA Final Four appearance where they were defeated by the Michigan Wolverines 57-69 on March 31st, 2018. This case study was chosen based on previous research that discussed the fact that only two other 11-seeded teams have ever made the Final Four in its history (Bogage, 2018). An opportunity to interpret themes pertaining to this rare phenomenon existed. The third and final case study was *Sportscenter*’s coverage of the 2007 Heisman Trophy presentation, on December
8th, 2007, won by the Florida Gator’s, Tim Tebow. An analysis of Tebow’s career showed that he demonstrated unique qualities both on and off the field that would be ripe for a thematic analysis of Sportscenter’s coverage of his winning of the Heisman Trophy. The purpose of this study is to identify the themes that are present in Sportscenter’s broadcasts of the sports success of the 2016-17 Clemson Tigers, the 2018 Loyola-Chicago Ramblers, and Tim Tebow’s Heisman Trophy victory in 2007. All three of the case studies possess separate unique qualities that make them important and relevant in a qualitative thematic analysis. The previous research showed that each, individually, possessed characteristics that could be exploited by sports media in order to create three separate and distinct narratives. The over-arching question of this study is to determine:

**Research Questions**

RQ: What are the themes ESPN’s Sportscenter uses when discussing the sports success of a collegiate team and/or individual?

The questions introduced by the selection of the three specific case studies seek to determine:

RQ1: What themes are present in the narratives provided by ESPN’s Sportscenter when discussing the 2016-17 Clemson Tiger football team?

RQ2: What themes are present in the narratives provided by ESPN’s Sportscenter when discussing the 2018 Loyola-Chicago Ramblers basketball team?

RQ3: What themes are present in the narratives provided by ESPN’s Sportscenter when discussing the 2007 Heisman Trophy winner, Tim Tebow?
Case studies often are used to describe phenomenon on a small scale and then the results can be extrapolated to fit into a larger context. The use of case studies is a descriptive account of a certain event or happening that can be analyzed to inform about a larger similar context and become an anchor point of knowledge within a larger academic discussion. Case studies may offer insights into particular phenomenon that cannot be broached by other research methods or strategies (Rowley, 2002). The strength of a case study that it is able to investigate an event or issue in its own context. Case studies are particularly adept in providing answers to the ‘How’ and ‘Why’ questions concerning a particular issue and can be utilized for descriptive, exploratory, and explanatory studies. Case studies are used as a research design that allows for theory and logic to be connected to the data and conclusions of a study. Case studies also allow for speculation as to a theory from the data collected from a specific unit of analysis.

**Thematic analysis**

Thematic analysis aids a researcher in drawing out themes that run through the narratives created in media. These themes may stand alone or be layered upon subthemes or subdivisions of the same theme. In a qualitative thematic analysis these factors must be considered to produce meaningful results and to ensure the data can fit into the larger academic discussion (Aronson, 1994; Lopez & Willis, 2004). Once themes are identified throughout a narrative it is essential, in thematic analyses to group these themes into categories that are then used to interpret the data in relation to the research question(s) being posed. The process of determining exact themes in narratives is determined by the researchers aim and experience. (Vaismoradi, et al, 2015) propose four phases of theme development:

1. **Initialization**: the reading and highlighting of units of analysis along with the coding and searching for “abstractions in participants’ accounts” (p. 103)
2. Construction: the classification, comparison, labeling, translating, defining and
description of relevant data

3. Rectification: immersion and distancing from the data, and relating themes to previous
research and established knowledge

4. Finalization: developing the story line, or answer to the research question(s)

These phases will allow for the thematic analysis process to be transparent and systemic.
Although qualitative research, is flexible in its ability to gain and decipher data, having a clear
understanding of the method to be used will help to ensure the accuracy of both the data
collection and analyzation of this qualitative thematic analysis.

Qualitative methods are the tools that researchers utilize to design their studies and
collect/analyze their data. One tool that qualitative researchers use in research design and data
collection is thematic analysis. Themes are often used in research as attribute, descriptor,
element, and concept and enables researchers to answer the research questions being posed
(Ayres, Kavanaugh, Knafl, 2003). A thematic analysis looks to extract themes, using content
analysis, from certain media, in this case Sportscenter clips. Theory and previous research acts
as a roadmap, a guide, to help extract and draw out these themes from media created narratives.
This study uses framing theory as the guide to follow to identify themes within the three case
studies selected.

In the case of this research, the unit of analysis will be 60 Sportscenter clips, pulled from
YouTube that contain broadcasts regarding three individual case studies. In this study a thematic
analysis will be conducted using framing theory, previous research, and the phases set out by
(Vaismoradi et al., 2015) to identify themes that run through Sportscenter’s coverage of three
specific case studies. An analysis of ESPN’s Sportscenter media clips will be conducted.
This study will utilize 20 ESPN Sportscenter clips pulled from YouTube for each of the three case studies. The case studies were selected due their differences in the possible themes they may contain according to the previous research (Lule, 2001; Bartholome et al., 2015; Messner et al., 2000; Frazier & Snyder, 1991). These clips will surround the individual events associated with each case study. Each clip ranges from :30 seconds to three minutes. Clips will be pulled from YouTube and will encompass the seven days before and after the chosen case studies. 10 clips from the seven days before each event and 10 clips from the seven days after each event will be utilized. Clips depicting the 2016-17 Clemson Tigers’ BCS national championship, occurring on January 9th, 2017, will be gathered from January 2nd, 2017, through January 16th, 2017. Clips that encompass the Loyola-Chicago Ramblers 2018 Final Four appearance occurring on March 31st, 2018, will be gathered from March 24th, 2018 through April 7th, 2018. The Sportscenter clips describing the Heisman Trophy winner, Tim Tebow (trophy was awarded December 8th, 2007) will be gathered from December 1, 2007 through December 15, 2007. These clips will be analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis. An inductive approach to thematic analysis allows for themes to emerge and are greatly linked to the data being viewed (Patton, 1990). Therefore, an inductive approach to analysis provides for a richer and more detailed description of the data being observed. Each clip will be watched 10-20 times in order to fully grasp the themes that emerge from the Sportscenter broadcast and the created narratives. Framing theory, coupled with the four phases of theme development introduced by Vaismoradi et al. (2015) will be utilized to identify the themes that are present in each of the three case studies. Themes will be identified and cataloged for future consideration and analyzation. The use of case studies to conduct research calls for generalizations that are drawn for the data collected. In order for these specific generalizations to be relevant there must be a presence of both reliability and validity,
which, along with the specific data garnered from the case study, should be compared and analyzed along with previous research associated with the given phenomenon. This study uses three distinct case studies, a thematic analysis of sports media, and previous research in order to extend the academic research of previous scholars in a way that is useful to further the application of framing theory.

Themes will be identified and cataloged for future consideration and analysis. By coupling framing theory with the four phases of theme development set out by Vaismoradi et al. (2015) in order to identify themes within ESPN’s Sportscenter’s coverage of these three distinct [2016-17 Clemson Tigers, 2018 Loyola-Chicago Ramblers, and the 2007 Heisman Trophy winner, Tim Tebow] an extension to the previous research can be achieved.
References


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